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**RESEARCH QUESTION:** How does Albert Camus use the symbols of light and the senses to explore the themes of existentialism and the absurd in “The Outsider?”

## Abstract

This research paper seeks to find out how Albert Camus uses the symbols of light and the senses to explore the themes of existentialism and the absurd in “*The Outsider*”. Camus uses a lot of symbolism in his novel, “*The Outsider*”. In a context where the main character dissociates himself from the normal functions of the society, symbolism becomes the ideal style of advancing the themes in the book. Light is a symbol which has been used recurrently in this novel. It has not been used in the traditional sense of something good, but it has been used as something that comes to disorient a person, in this case Meursault.

The author of this novel also uses other senses in an attempt to advance his theme of existentialism. The sense of sight becomes the key through which Meursault is able to live in some kind of detachment from the rest of the society. He assumes an observatory role in life and acts like just a passive person who has no capacity to control what happens to him. One significant detachment from even himself is that he is unable to talk to his lawyer because he feels bored. He does also not concern himself with what happens to other people and does not act even things obviously happen to others.

The conclusion found in this research paper is that existentialistic views do not provide the ideal solutions to human life. This is because people with existentialistic viewpoints tend to disregard the whole society, and they are likely suffered for their detachment, just as Meursault suffers in the end.

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## Introduction

Albert Camus has been accepted as one of the prominent authors who has questioned the existence of man throughout his novels. In his first-person narrated book, "*The Outsider*", Camus examines the fears that grip humanity in the situation of inevitable death and other forces of nature. Camus believes that there is more to life than just the fears that human beings have. He believes that humanity should strive to detach themselves from the fears of human life and look at life as just something that is passing. Death will come to all people no matter what they do, and Camus, through his main character, Meursault, who is an educated and intelligent man, explores the themes of existentialism and absurdity in life. The plot is formed on Meursault's unusual point of view regarding life which turns him into a murderer as he has been negatively exposed under the conditions outside. His senses are not in accord with the general regulations of the society, which creates his tragic and unjust faith as a result of coincidences. Throughout the book, Camus deals with matters such as social ethics in the absurd world, the strict religious faith and the severe judiciary system. The accepted and applied regulations can cause haphazard deaths and psychological violence for the ones who do not comply with them. Moreover, they may create irrationalities for man in various situations. In his book, "*The Outsider*", Camus uses symbolism of light to reflect the soul of his main character, Meursault. In literature, light is used to depict issues such as revelation, rebirth and cleansing. Camus, however, uses the symbol of light in an unusual manner in this novel; it reflects someone who has risen to understand and accept his fate even in the most difficult situation of human life. In addition, Camus uses symbolism of the senses to express the physical existence of the human life and its relation with absurdity. Sensuality in literature helps people to understand the link between the internal and the external world. By using the symbolism of sense, Camus identifies various actions and scenarios

that aids in understanding his viewpoint on existentialism. Through senses, people are able to demonstrate their emotions and depiction of the daily happenings. For anyone to stand out from the rest there must be some form of sensuality either consciously or subconsciously, which will play a role in their life. While human life is intrinsically uncertain, physical and natural features do not restrict individual to display it as a journey in their outer interactions. Meursault's senses lead him to a dangerous path, while searching the meaning of life, where he finds himself surrounded by limited and intolerant rules. Eventually, he is deceived by his senses and stays alone among the prejudiced people as an "*outsider*".

I hope to be able to make some conclusions about the use and importance of symbolism of light and the senses in the exploration of the themes of existentialism and the absurd in this novel.

## Symbolism of Light

Light is mostly used as a symbol of hope in most works of literature; it shows people who hang on to optimism that their situations will change even when there seems to be no apparent way of doing so. However, in "The Outsider", Camus uses light with some negativity in order to negate the common positive views that people give to light. This is because the main character, Meursault tends to believe the opposite of what others believe in the society. The first instance that light is used in a negative manner is after the death of Meursault's mother. "*I counted ten in all, gliding almost soundlessly through the bleak white glare*". (Camus 19). The character says that when his mother's friends came, they floated in the blinding light and sat without the chairs creaking. The fact that this light is blinding shows that the people who came to mourn with Meursault were just a distraction to him. The presence of friends during the burial of a beloved person of ten makes the situation easier. However, the presence of Meursault's mother's friends just brings some form of blindness. "*Wherever I looked I saw the same sun-drenched countryside, and the sky was so dazzling that I dared not to raise my eyes.*" (Camus 25). In this case, Meursault is unable to reflect on his inner being because there are people who are blocking his inner light. This is an existentialist ideal which shows that Meursault has an independent view of life. "*Mother died today, or, maybe, yesterday, I can't be sure.*" (Camus 13). While other people are mourning for the death of his mother, Meursault is not even aware of the day that his mother died. This shows that Meursault is so much detached from his emotional self and he just exists as days come. "*I felt the first waves of heat lapping my back, and my dark suit made things worse, I couldn't imagine why we waited so long for getting under way.*" (Camus 24). However, Meursault is much detached from the reality that the sun can cause suffering and he is ready to tolerate it. He is at the core of his own existence, and this reveals the existentialistic

ideals that Camus is trying to pass across. ‘*If one goes too slowly, there’s the risk of a heat-stroke. But if one goes too fast, one perspires, and the cold air in the church gives one chill.*’ (Camus 26). Since humanity cannot change nature, Meursault believes that he will get on well by ignoring it. Therefore, when the nurse tells him that walking slowly will cause sunstroke and walking fast will make him catch a chill in the church. Meursault tells himself that ‘*either way one was for it.*’ (Camus 26). It did not matter how he walked, because in his point of view, there is no way out.

The sun in “The Outsider” is shown as something that distorts Meursault’s judgement and makes him capable of doing things that he would not do under normal circumstances. It seems to be an evil force that remains there to mislead people even when their intentions are meant to be good. For instance, at the beach, Meursault grips the gun tightly because the sun is burning him. When he sees the Arab, he does not react even when he should have done something such as running away to avoid being bullied by the Arabs. However, his reaction is not towards the Arab. Rather, he reacts towards the sun and shoots the Arab. “*It was just the same sort of heat as at my mother’s funeral, and I had the same disagreeable sensations.*” (Camus 63). Even though Meursault thought that “*it was a fool thing to do*”, he “*took that step, just one step, forward*”. (Camus 64). This unusual behaviour of Meursault shows the extent to which he is detached from humanity and just cares about inanimate things that have no emotion. This is an existentialist perspective of life that removes a person from all feelings towards other people and replaces it with the pursuit of self-fulfilments. The murder scene is also an imagery that shows the main character’s disorientation with light. This is because the heat of sun and light are blamed for the cause of murder. When Meursault pulls the trigger and kills the Arab, Camus writes that the sun’s light continued to shine on the same sand as before. This advances the view of existentialism

because it tends to show that human existence does not change the world. As such Meursault becomes even more detached with the environment since he feels that nothing will change in the end.

### Symbolism of the Senses

Meursault leaves the normal ways of life and seeks to experience his life in a different way from everyone else in the society. He just exists and nothing matters to him so long as he is alive. He subjects himself to a life that is characterized by lack of any emotions. Through this detachment, he is able to do weird things that others would not do, such as when he does not want the porter to unscrew the lid of the coffin for Meursault in order to see his deceased mother for the last time. Meursault rather tells the porter “*not to trouble*”. (Camus 16). He is not affected by the most intense emotions that affect people in normal circumstances. He does not mourn for the death of people close to him and drinks “*café ou lait*” while “*offering the porter a cigarette*”. (Camus 18). He does not feel love or any sort of emotion when he is with a woman. “*A moment later she asked me if I loved her. I said that sort of question had no meaning, really; but I supposed I didn't.*” (Camus 42). He cannot feel a sense of guilt when he kills a person and he does not feel answerable to anyone that he has killed a person. To him, all other people are just objects in the universe that cannot determine their own destiny. “*Mother now was buried, and tomorrow I'd be going back to work as usual. Really, nothing in my life had changed.*” (Camus 32). In fact, he feels closer to inanimate objects like the sun than to other humans.

Camus uses the symbolism of the senses to advance his views that people should concern themselves with their own lives; this symbolism places people at the centre of the universe since individual persons are the only ones who know how they feel. These feelings are personalized,



and people can lie about them to others, but no one can lie about his own feelings to himself. As such, the existentialist ideals are best explained by the manner in which Meursault behaves and treats others through what he feels. *“I explained that my physical condition at any given moment influenced my feelings.”* (Camus 69) The symbolism of the senses is best seen through Meursault’s detachment from the self and other people in the story. Meursault is a man who has lost touch with himself. This can be deduced from his smoking habits. He is not concerned much about his health, and in the novel, he is smoking most of the time. He is also disoriented since he enjoys spending time alone. For instance, after the burial of his mother, he goes back to his place, and on the following day, he spends the whole day by *“smoking and looking at people who are passing on the street.”* (Camus 13). His self-centeredness is evident at the side of his dead mother. *“.....with everything shimmering in the heat-haze, there was something inhuman, discouraging, about this landscape.”* Here, Meursault confesses that he is more oppressed by the heat than by his mother’s death. When he is arrested, Meursault has a chance to explain his actions to his lawyer, but he tells the reader that he is *“tired of repeating the same story”* and too tired to do so. (Camus 71). Therefore, Meursault has lost touch with himself since he seems to accept his fate without a twitch of conscience. *“I realized that this cell was my last home, a dead end, as one says.”* (Camus 75).

## The Sense of Sight

Throughout the book, Meursault acts like an observer even in situations that most obviously affect him. Meursault's sense of sight explains his unique way of living. This is because his other senses seem to be dead. "*I answered that in recent years I'd rather lost the habit of noting my feelings, and hardly knew what to answer.*" (Camus 63). He identifies with inanimate things he can see in the sky. For instance, Meursault says that he wished that he could live in the "*trunk of a dead tree*", doing nothing but looking up the sky above. (Camus 79). He believes that he would get used to this, and he would not worry about other things like being incarcerated in prison. He says that his memory of the things he had seen keeps him busy in prison. In fact, his lack of conscience is seen when he says that a person could live for "*a hundred years in prison*" and he would not exhaust his memories of the things he had seen. (Camus 81). The sense of sight is perhaps the one that gives Meursault the beliefs he has in life. This is because everything that seems to determine his decisions and beliefs are things that he can see such as the sun and the sky. Thus, Meursault is in juxtaposition with people who struggle to lead their lives without a moral lens and a God they cannot see. Even the memories that linger in his mind when he is locked away in prison are of things that he saw in the past such as "*relieving nature*". (Camus 82). Therefore, it becomes a question as to whether Meursault would have continued to have or even developed these beliefs and his existentialist way of living if he had been blind. It could be argued that Meursault's ability to see blinded the manner in which he saw the society as a whole.

## Senses of Touch and Hearing

Though they are not as evident as the senses of sight, senses of touch and hearing cannot be ignored in developing the themes of existentialism and the absurd. Meursault acts in an

indifferent manner to things that he is told. “*These people were staring hard at me and I guessed they were the jury. But somehow I didn’t see them as individuals.*” (Camus 85). He seems to lock out everything that other people say and hold on to his own beliefs. This is because he leads a life that is not similar to anyone’s life in his society. In fact, the title of this novel, “*The Outsider*”, shows that even though Meursault is a man who lives within the society, he is mentally very far away from it.

During the proceedings of his trial, Meursault listens to the judge and others who talk over and over again, but Meursault remains silent. In fact, he feels relieved when the judge concludes and says that there was no more for that day. He even says that the times he enjoys most during the trials is the time that the judge announced the verdict. He does not want to hear other people talk about his case even in the court room. He just sits there in a passive manner as other people are engaged in determining his faith. He says that people argued as if the case did not belong to him, as if the whole of the trial did not have significance to him since no one asked for his opinion. However, he is contradicting himself since replies “*no*” when he is asked whether he has anything to say. (Camus 67). This is absurd and advances the themes of existentialism and the absurd, in that Meursault tries to view other people from his own perspective; a perspective that has no morals or ethical considerations. This is seen when Meursault says that all people were dealing with “*a monster, a man with no morals*”. Meursault says that he could “*feel*” the hatred of people who had come to his trial and he gets a “*foolish desire to burst into tears.*” (Camus 91). The aspect of feeling the hatred through the skin makes the reader see a person who has dissociated himself from any emotion. To him, abstract things do not seem to have any value. Therefore, he is able to withdraw himself from the ethics of the society, the state’s laws, religion and other feelings of love and compassion that help people get through life. The increasing heat

of the sun is the only thing with which he seems to associate because he can feel it. Therefore, he believes that such things are the ones that shape one's life, and other emotions corrupt one's mind. To him, the prison walls, the things he encounters in life, his cigarettes and other concrete things are worth more than things that have been constructed out of abstractness.

#### Other Senses in "The Outsider"

Existentialists believe that an individual's life takes the centre stage in the universe. In this light, Meursault disregards the lives of all other people and tends to believe that his life matters more than others and he does not care what others do with theirs. Meursault's inability to love is also seen in the manner in which he takes the institution of marriage and family. He abandons his mother at a care centre, The Home for Aged Persons at Marengo, which is fifty miles from Algiers where he lives. He does not visit her often and moreover he does not come back to this place until his mother's death. Meursault is also detached from the whole society and has no regard for the institutions of the society including marriage. His relationship with Marie is only physical for him. He does not even try to get to know her. This is because he views life from a personal and existentialistic point of view, where any attachment is unnecessary. He does not care that he is hurting Marie, who obviously loves him. When she asks whether he would marry her, he says that he does not mind and they would if she was "*keen*" on it. (Camus 48). The extent to his detachment to Marie is seen when he goes to prison; he does not miss her, but he misses the fact that he will not be with her again. This shows a selfish person who has constructed the world to fit his own desires. When Raymond tells him about suspicions that Raymond's girlfriend was cheating on him, Meursault does not try to convince Raymond even

stop Raymond while he is beating his girlfriend. This points a picture of a man who lacks love and compassion for any human being.

The existentialist views in "*The Outsider*" shows a person who is not ready to open up and see the world in the perspective of the rest of the society. He believes that life is complete in its own light and it should not be complicated by people who try to give moral and ethical perspectives to it. "*I'd very little time left, and I wasn't going to waste it on God.*" (Camus 117). He continues to hold his views of an ideal world where one is not concerned about others; a life that is not affected by others in the society or any superior power. Because of his existentialistic perspective towards life, he believes that death is imminent and people should not worry when and how they will die. They should neither fear nor worry because they have no control over it. However, there appears to be a change of the tone in the whole novel at the end when Meursault '*feels*' ready to '*start life over again*'. (Camus 120).

## Conclusion

From the discussion of existentialism above, it is apparent that existentialist views are not the ideal views that can take the world forward. This is because it brings out some inhumanity in people, and they violate the basic principles of human existence, because they place themselves at the centre of human existence. They do not have any respect for members of society, social institutions and even the basic moral and ethical principles that guide these institutions. This is seen in the light of Meursault who has not respect for his society, does not love others does not even try to show some compassion for them. The consequence of this view of life is death, as seen in Meursault's own execution in the end.

## Works Cited

Camus, Albert. *The Outsider*. Great Britain, Penguin Books, 1979